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Elements in Ouster of Panama Chief: Beheading and a Power Duel

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PANAMA, Oct. 1 — When the Panamanian Army forced the country's President to resign last week, it was apparently an effort to bury a growing murder scandal and to end a power struggle within the armed forces, according to several Panamanian and foreign political experts here.

The army commander, Gen. Manuel Antonio Noriega, returned from a trip to Europe last Wednesday to squelch a palace coup that was probably provoked by public demands for an investigation into the torture and decapitation two weeks ago of one of the army's leading critics, Dr. Hugo Spadafora, the political analysts said.

Although no one seems to be absolutely certain of the chain of events, it appears that in order to soothe his opponents in the officer corps, General Noriega felt it necessary to depose President Nicolás Ardito Barletta last Friday.

Mr. Barletta had hinted that he might appoint a commission to investigate Dr. Spadafora's killing. Several Panamanian political leaders, pointing to strong circumstantial evidence, say the killing was almost certainly carried out by the army, though perhaps not on General Noriega's orders.

Was Falling From Favor

Mr. Barletta, who was originally selected to become President by General Noriega, was already falling from favor because he had failed to revive the country's debt-burdened economy. He had alienated virtually every sector of Panamanian society with ineptly presented policies that offered the sour medicine of tightening taxes, cutting protecting tariffs and reducing privileges for labor unions, several sources here said.

According to Panamanian and foreign political analysts, General Noriega summarily summoned Mr. Barletta from the United Nations General Assembly meeting in New York last Thursday night.

Mr. Barletta initially refused to resign, but finally gave in after being held and threatened for 14 hours, according to members of Mr. Barletta's family and other highly reliable sources. The United States Ambassador to Panama, Everett Ellis Briggs, had counseled Mr. Barletta not to return to face the army, two reliable sources said.

Mr. Barletta reportedly told a local television station, as well as friends, that something other than a dispute over economic policies had caused the army to force him to resign. The comment appears to lend weight to the belief that the army, which is known here as the Panamanian Defense Force, deposed him to stop an investigation into Dr. Spadafora's death.

An Unusually Brutal Killing

The killing, two weeks ago, seems to have focused discontent because it was an unusually brutal act in a country that has escaped the worst of the political violence that has swept the rest of Central America. Opposition leaders and Dr. Spadafora's family are continuing to demand that an independent commission be appointed to investigate his killing, and one of Dr. Spadafora's brothers is backing the demand with a hunger strike.

Mr. Spadafora was a medical doctor with a taste for revolutions. After fighting in Guinea-Bissau, he joined a former Sandinista commander, Edén Pastora Gómez, in recruiting more than 300 other Panamanians to help overthrow Anastasio Somoza Debayle, the Nicaraguan dictator, in 1979.

After joining Mr. Pastora again to fight against the Sandinista Government they had helped put in power, Dr. Spadafora left to become an adviser to Miskito Indian rebels in Costa Rica.

Tried to Slip Across Border

In recent months, however, he had spoken of his hopes of overthrowing General Noriega and freeing his country of army domination, according to friends and associates who were with him in Costa Rica. Dr. Spadafora, who was 45 years old, also accused General Noriega of being a narcotics trafficker who had corrupted Panama.

According to his family and to an official report by the Costa Rican police presented to the Costa Rican Government, Dr. Spadafora tried to slip across the border into Panama on Sept. 13. His decapitated body was found the next day just across the border, back inside Costa Rica, stuffed in an old United States mailbag, according to the police report. The head has not been found.

There are several indications that the Panamanian Army may have killed Dr. Spadafora. In their investigation, the Costa Rican police found two witnesses who gave sworn testimony that they saw Dr. Spadafora being detained by a Panamanian corporal at a military checkpoint on entering Panama.

In addition, a witness who lives near where the body was found told the police that he had seen two olive green cars of a make used by the Panamanian Army leave the site late in the night before the body was discovered. There is no checkpoint on the Costa Rican side of the border to prevent a car from driving across from Panama, the police report said.

"All indications suggest that Dr. Hugo Spadafora was killed in Panamanian territory and his body thrown in Costa Rican territory," the police report says.

An 'F-8' on the Body

Dr. Spadafora's body also had a symbol cut into it that read "F-8," according to the report. Another Panamanian opposition leader, Dr. Mauro Zúñiga, was picked up and beaten last month by men he believed were in the Panamanian Army who wrote "F-8" on his back as well.

No one is sure what the letter and number denote, but last year the army had a special unit known as "F-7" that served as a paramilitary force to repress political opponents during the Presidential election, according to well-informed sources here. The army unit's leader was killed under mysterious circumstances, but the sources speculate that "F-8" may be the name of a new army unit or the symbol of a death squad formed in the memory of the previous unit.

What continues to puzzle observers here, however, is the brutality and openness of the killing of Dr. Spadafora. They say it is unlike the army to leave so many indications that it may have been responsible and unlike General Noriega, a man known for his subtlety, to authorize an action that could have high political costs. Some political analysts here speculate that Dr. Spadafora was killed by a group within the army to force General Noriega to take a harder line with opponents or to embarrass General Noriega and force him out of power.

Internal Opposition in Army

Col. Roberto Díaz Herrera, a relative of Brig. Gen. Omar Torrijos Herrera, the former Panamanian leader, is believed to have led internal army opposition that nearly deposed General Noriega last week, according to a well-informed political analyst here.

Colonel Díaz has been resisting his mandatory retirement next February, but is now expected to be shifted from his job as Chief of Staff in a round of changes next week.

Though the crisis may blow over, Mr. Barletta's resignation appears to have done little so far to diminish tension here. Panamanians express deep cynicism toward the army after three years in which the military has either imposed or deposed five Presidents. The 15,000-man force is most often described as a kind of Mafia that makes millions from kickbacks and drug dealing.

"People speak of the Bolivianization of Panama," a political observer here said.

Army intelligence operatives have threatened local journalists in recent days, and the main opposition columnist has gone into hiding, according to reporters and editors here. Ambassador Briggs warned the opposition newspaper La Prensa on Monday that General Noriega might close the paper if it continued to criticize the army's actions, according to reporters and editors. An American Embassy spokesman refused to confirm or deny the report.